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Love and Death: Relational Metaphors Following the Death of a Child

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Recognised as one of the most painful human experiences, the purpose of this study was to uncover the relational and metaphorical themes embodied in bereaved parent narratives following the death of a child. Using a grounded approach, 420 narratives were analysed. Results of the study found (a) relational trajectory, (b) grief/coping, and (c) communication as prominent relational themes. In the present study, bereaved parents often described their conjugal relationship metaphorically as being in motion, as a living organism, and as on a journey. Grief was primarily described metaphorically as a type of journey. Communication was metaphorically described in terms of being open or closed. Discovering the experiences of bereaved parents adds to our knowledge about how the stress of child death impacts relational resiliency. Implications are discussed.

■ **Keywords:** bereavement, child death, grief, communication, metaphor

The death of a child is considered one of the most stressful events that can cause significant strain on relationships (Rosenblatt, 2000). Bereaved couples are left to negotiate the challenge of fostering mutually supportive relationships while navigating their own grief. Supportive families can serve as a buffering or protective effect on adjustment following a stressful life event (Oliva, Jimenez, & Parra, 2009). Yet, without loving and supportive relational interactions, the death of a child can have a profoundly negative effect on dyadic and familial relational quality (Lohan & Murphy, 2006). Understanding the language used by bereaved parents to articulate their perceptions and experiences with their spousal relationships can help us better understand the lens through which they conceptualise their relationships. This area of study is valuable as it enhances our understanding of how our linguistic choices both constrain and delimit our human experiences (Owen, 1990). This article examines bereaved parents' perceptions of their relationships with a specific lens on the metaphors used. Metaphors are considered devices that structure our perceptions and expectations. While there is research that has examined metaphorical parental bereavement resiliency (Young, 2008), the authors have not found any studies that have focused on understanding the metaphors bereaved parents use to shape how they view their conjugal relationships. This contribution to research is important because metaphors are weaved

through our daily language and can provide a perspective through which to understand relational adaptation following parental bereavement.

Theory of Metaphor

Metaphor is defined as 'a figure of speech in which a word or phrase literally denoting one kind of object or idea is used in place of another to suggest a likeness or analogy between them' (Merriam-Webster, 2012). The etymology of the word is derived from the Greek language, with 'meta' meaning over or across, and 'phor' meaning to carry (Geary, 2011). Metaphors are a common occurrence in language, with some research suggesting that a metaphor is utilised every 10–25 words of spoken language (Geary, 2011).

While many have conceptualised metaphor as a device purely of poetic fabrication, others suggest that metaphor serves as a conceptual cognitive system that embodies our perceptions of our realities (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). These metaphors often unknowingly structure our thought processes by shaping how we perceive, think and behave (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Our belief and value

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systems are deeply entrenched in our metaphorical system of thought. Most of our thoughts are understood in terms of other concepts (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). Lakoff and Johnson (2003) uses the terminology of ‘source domain’ to represent that which we are familiar with and ‘target domain’ to stand for that which we are unfamiliar with. As such, when using metaphor, we take our knowledge of the source domain and overlay those thoughts to frame our understanding of the target domain (Lakoff & Johnson, 2003).

Taking a broader, more comprehensive look at conceptual metaphors, Lakoff (1993) explains that there are general metaphorical tendencies in how people describe events in life. More specifically, Lakoff (1993) suggests that events are often conceptualised in terms of space, motion and force. He describes the event structure metaphor in terms of states as locations (e.g., ‘He is in love’), changes are movements (e.g., ‘We can only go forward from here’), actions are self-propelled movements (e.g., ‘I worked myself up into a rage’), causes are forces (e.g., ‘Her death hit us with a lot of force’), purposes are destinations (e.g., ‘We’ve made it this far’), means are paths, and difficulties are impediments to motion. In terms of difficulties serving as impediments to motion toward a destination, these metaphorical difficulties are commonly expressed as blockages, features of the terrain, burdens, counterforces or a lack of an energy source (Lakoff, 1993). Blockages may be expressed as ‘We ran into a brick wall’. Features of the terrain might be expressed as ‘It’s been uphill all the way’. Burdens may be expressed in terms of ‘Carrying quite a load’. Counterforces may be expressed in terms of ‘Quit pushing me around’. A lack of an energy source could be expressed as ‘We’re running out of steam’. Overall, Lakoff (1993) provides us with a framework for understanding the central tendency of humans to describe event structures using metaphorical language in systematic ways. The use of metaphors can aid in the understanding of different parts of life by making comparisons (what is known to the unknown; what is familiar with the unfamiliar; Vandecreek, 1985).

Relational Metaphors

The use of metaphor to understand how people conceptualise and create meaning regarding personal relationships has been documented in the literature (Baxter, 2003; Owen, 1985, 1990). These studies have identified several metaphors that couples use to form their understanding of personal relationships. The metaphors include relationship as journey, relationship as machine, relationship as containers, and relationship as living organism.

Relationship as journey

Relational partners often use the conceptual metaphors ‘relationship as a journey’ or ‘love-as-journey’ to form an understanding of their relationships (Baxter, 2003;

Owen 1985). In terms of cognitive mapping, the *source* domain is considered the journey and the *target* domain is the relationship. As such, they are using their existing knowledge about travel and journeys to reason and to describe their perceptions of the process of relating. Metaphors are used to describe the relationship in terms of being on a dead-end street, as spinning one’s wheels, as a long and bumpy road (car), off the track (train), as being on the rocks (boat), or as someone needing to bail out (plane; Lakoff & Johnson, 2003). The relationship is conceptualised metaphorically in terms of transportation encountering obstacles or setbacks while travelling.

Relationship as machine

A machine is considered to be an apparatus containing multiple parts that all serve a specific function. Machines are meant to run smoothly with precision and consistency. However, sometimes machines require maintenance and repair if they are not working properly. When people describe their relationship using a machine metaphor, we expect to find descriptions about the relationship running smoothly, being a little off, and so on. Owen (1985, 1990) found evidence of the ‘relationship as machine’ metaphor through narratives that included the use of terms such as ‘shifting’, ‘rubbing’, ‘friction’, ‘timing’, ‘smooth-running’ and ‘clicking’.

Relationship as containers

The ‘relationship as containers’ metaphor uses a spatial orientation to understand relationships. As Lakoff and Johnson (2003) suggest, the properties of containers implies a sense of durability or stability such that there is an inside and an outside to a container that is separated with an actual or imaginary boundary. Couples may say they are ‘in’ a relationship; implying that there is a well-defined inside and an outside (Baxter, 2003; Owen, 1990).

Relationship as living organism

Living organisms can be understood as an entity that is cellular, grows, needs nurturing, needs energy, propagates and eventually dies (Baxter, 2003). Relationships can be conceptualised metaphorically as something that grows (‘We grew apart’), as having good health (‘It’s a healthy relationship’), as withering (‘We just stopped nourishing our relationship’) or as ending (‘It was the death of our relationship’).

While this is not an exhaustive list of the ways people can frame their understanding of relationships using metaphor, it serves as a summary of the most common relational metaphors found in the literature. The next section presents an overview of common metaphorical conceptualisations of grief and the grieving/coping process.

Bereavement and Grief Metaphors

The use of metaphor and storytelling in bereavement resiliency has been documented (Gersie, 1992; Gersie & King, 1989). Metaphors can help the bereaved to describe and express their grief, the negotiation of the grief process with their partner, as well as the nature of the relationships left behind.

In the context of bereavement, several different authors have identified useful metaphorical conceptualisation of the grieving process. Specifically, Graves (2009) maintains that the bereaved often use the metaphor of 'grief as journey' to embody their understanding of the grief experience (Graves, 2009). She describes grief in terms of a journey taking different paths: on a river (being pushed and pulled in strong current), down a long and winding road (no end in sight), on railway tracks (on a path that is already fixed and they can't get off), in a tidal ebb and flow, and as caught in a whirlpool (pain overcoming the bereaved like waves). Schwartz-Borden (1992) suggests that in order to help the bereaved talk about their grief, she compares the bereaved metaphorically as an amputee. Just as an amputee cannot 'get over' losing a limb, a bereaved parent does not get over losing a child. Incidentally, the idea of 'getting over' something metaphorically represents manoeuvring through an obstacle. Both situations (an amputee and the bereaved) involve enduring pain. She extends the amputee metaphor to include rehabilitation. The bereaved and an amputee are both faced with the challenge of living without the deceased and a limb, respectively.

Research Questions

Considering that metaphor is pervasive and seamlessly integrated into language, the present study sought to uncover the common metaphorical themes that bereaved parents used to describe their relationships following the death of a child. Revealing the relational metaphorical choices individuals make can shed light on how bereaved couples socially construct their own relationships. No studies to date have specifically examined the relational metaphors of bereaved parents.

Based on the review of literature the following research questions were posed:

1. What are the central relational themes that bereaved parents report that characterise their relationships following the death of a child?
2. What metaphors are used by bereaved parents to describe their relationship following the death of a child?

Method

Recruitment and Respondent Characteristics

This was part of a larger, mixed-methods study of parental bereavement conducted online (Cacciatore et al., in

press). This research was approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) at the second author's institution. A link to an online survey using Qualtrics software was sent to 1,120 members of a non-profit organisation that provides education and support to bereaved parents, between June and October of 2010. Inclusion criteria included a minimum of 18 years of age and having lost a child at any age from any cause. Of those members, 972 email addresses were current and valid. The initial invitation for participation received 313 responses. To increase the response rate, email reminders were sent and respondents were invited to enter a drawing to receive a gift card as an incentive to participate, resulting in a final total of 503 responses, 490 valid, for a response rate of 50.41%. This study analyses the responses of the bereaved parents who replied to the open-ended question ($N = 420$) regarding the impact of bereavement on their relationship.

The sample of 420 bereaved parents was primarily female ($n = 398$, 94.8%), Caucasian ($n = 366$, 87.1%), and well educated, with most respondents having some college education. The mean number of years since loss of their loved one was 4.29 years ($SD = 3.95$).

Survey Instrument

The survey instrument contained an open-ended response opportunity for respondents to share their stories in as much or little detail as desired. The statement soliciting open-ended responses was: 'In your own words, please tell us how your loss affected your relationship with your spouse or partner.'

Thematic Analysis

A thematic analysis was conducted to discover the central themes reported by bereaved parents regarding conjugal adjustment. Qualitative responses were sorted to identify elements of the stories that addressed spousal relations following the death. An analysis of the open-ended narratives was conducted using a grounded approach (Corbin & Strauss, 1990; Strauss & Corbin, 1994, 1998). A constant comparative method was followed, which involved going back and forth comparing each utterance to the emergent themes and checking and revising the interpretation as needed (Glaser & Strauss, 1967). This methodology involves reading and rereading the narratives, with the goal of becoming immersed in the meaning structures expressed, and examining the contexts and conditions under which themes and subthemes occur (e.g., Umphrey & Cacciatore, 2011).

The stages of this process include assigning conceptual labels to the data and generating categories and properties (open-coding), integrating categories and their properties, delimiting the themes, and creating thick and rich descriptions of the emerging themes. Each statement in the narratives was analysed to first discover and label the concepts (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin,

1998). Once concepts were identified, higher order categories were developed. Those higher order categories were described in terms of their properties.

Once the properties were assigned, each code was read and reread to determine the nature of the statement and how to place it. The constant comparative method was used to compare each statement with the emergent themes to determine its fit within a theme or if new or subthemes were necessary. Statements were rearranged until core categories were revealed. This process continued until no new codes or categories emerged and the data and all codes were all accounted for (Glaser & Strauss, 1967; Strauss & Corbin, 1998).

Metaphor Analysis

Provided that there is very little research on the relational metaphors of bereaved parents, systematic metaphor analysis was used in order to capture the metaphorical patterns of thought (Schmitt, 2005). The intention of this methodology is to step by step reconstruct the language, thoughts, feelings, actions and contextual meaning of bereaved parents (Schmitt, 2005). The first step in the process was to identify the metaphors found in the text. A metaphor is a word or phrase that can be comprehended beyond the literal contextual meaning, such that the literal meaning is derived from an area of physical or cultural experience. The meaning was transferred to a second, abstract area (Schmitt, 2005). The metaphors identified were copied to a separate list. The metaphors were then grouped according to the same image source and target. The metaphorical concepts went through a process of comparison to account for the variety of manifestations and experiences. Finally, the process involved interpretation and explication of each metaphorical concept that was generated.

Results

The results of the thematic analysis revealed three major themes bereaved parents discussed when talking about their conjugal relationships: relational trajectory, grief/coping, and communication. In terms of the trajectory of the relationship with their spouse, 71.5% said that the child death brought the couple together, 20.8% indicated that the death distanced them from their partners, and 7.7% indicated that their relationship had periods of strain and coming together. When addressing grieving styles, 37.2% of respondents talked about grief and coping. Finally, when participants talked about communication, 44.6% talked about communication as being open and 54.6% characterised it as being closed.

Thematic and Metaphor Results

All of the emergent relational narratives contained at least one metaphorical expression. The metaphorical themes that emerged from the data characterised the thoughts of

bereaved parents regarding their relationship with their spouse following the death of a child. These themes will be described under the main narrative categories identified: (a) relational adjustment/trajectory, (b) different grieving styles, and (c) communication skills. Each theme and metaphorical conceptualisation will be discussed in greater detail.

Relational adjustment/trajectory

To begin, bereaved parents talked about whether they stayed together as a couple or separated. Many bereaved parents referred to the loss in terms of a 'force' on the relationship in the form of strain (Event as Force). This strain was revealed by the selection of metaphors used to express this burden: 'It strained our relationship' and 'Our stress levels went through the roof'. One participant referred to the loss in terms of it serving as a challenge ('the loss tested our relationship', 'our relationship has been challenged'). For many bereaved parents, the relational strain caused by the death could either take the couple in one of two directions, which was metaphorically expressed in one narrative: 'After her death we decided early on that it was either going to tear us apart or make us stronger.'

Couples who intended to stay together most commonly shared the tendency to describe their relational adaptation with their significant other in terms of a movement toward physical closeness. Participants used the following metaphors to express this change: 'The loss brought us together', 'We lean on each other', 'We rely on each other more', and 'We are closer than ever'. Others expressed the impact of the loss on the relationship metaphorically as the act of strengthening the bond between two objects. Participants expressed this change as: 'It strengthened our marriage', 'We are more bonded', 'It cemented our relationship forever', and 'Our loss binded us'. Less often, but just as important, other participants conceptualised their relationship in terms of a living entity experiencing growth (e.g., 'Our relationship grew stronger' and 'We have grown closer') and features of the terrain (e.g., 'We know our relationship can weather any storm', and 'We found our way back to each other').

For those individuals who reported emotional or intimate distancing from their significant other, most often descriptions of the impact of the child death on the relationship were more consistent with a journey focus (Relationship as Journey). Examples of participants' metaphorical journey statements included: 'We drifted apart' or 'It drove us apart', 'It was very rough', 'The relationship was rocky', and 'It has created a lot of distance between my spouse and I'. Other participants described the journey using war/battle terminology: 'My relationship with my husband has been a battle' and 'After losing [deceased child] it nearly destroyed us'. Another metaphorical conception of the loss on the couple used the idea of an object being divided into parts (parts to a whole): 'We split

up', 'We broke up', and 'The loss tore us apart'. Other metaphors less used but equally important included comparison to an empty container ('My relationship with my husband has been drained hugely'), as something heavy being carried ('Our loss has added a significant weight to our already strained relationship'), and the relationship as an object being struck ('Our relationship has taken hits').

Grieving styles

Grieving is a natural response to loss. To begin, grief in relation to a partner was generally conceptualised in terms of enduring a difficult journey ('It was a hard and long road', and 'I am trying to find my way through this horrible journey'). Others conceptualised grief in terms of the breadth in which it affected them ('It affected every corner of our lives').

Understanding and adapting to a partner's grieving style proved challenging for many bereaved parents. Acceptance of these different grieving styles was revealed in the following collection of narratives: 'My spouse and I handled [deceased child's] death differently at first', 'I accept the fact that we grieve differently', and 'We were able to support the others' needs'. In terms of grieving metaphors, participants talked relationally about being on different paths (Grief as Journey): 'We are definitely on our own paths', and 'We are so far apart in how we deal with our grief'. Other participants described negotiating grief with a partner in terms of a process ('We were each going through our own process of grief', 'I did not understand his grief process') or being on different levels ('We grieved on different levels').

Others expressed the adaptation to the loss and their grief reactions as being complementary with each other in a positive way. For example: 'We took turns with the grief spells' and 'When he was strong, I was weak'. Other participants expressed the different grieving styles as being in opposition with each other: 'My husband had learned to move forward and I still feel stuck'. Grief was also expressed in terms of how one handles it: 'My husband still hasn't dealt properly (or at all) with his death', 'We dealt with his death in different ways' and 'He dealt with it by staying busy around the house'. Overall, the differences in grieving were apparent for those couples who worked together through their grief. However, they were able to adjust to those differences and accept them for what they were. Those who reported relational disharmony acknowledged the differences in grieving, but they did not report an acceptance of those differences: 'My husband and I grieve differently. There has been resentment, anger and sadness because of this' and 'He could not take that I cried and he eventually left'.

Communication skills

Very often, when talking about their relationships, the bereaved would use the quality of communication as a reference point. Communication about the death of a

child can be difficult when there is inconsistency in how a couple wants to talk about the deceased child. The decision about whether or not to discuss the topic of death or the child was metaphorically reflected by several participants as 'the elephant in the room' or by one participant's expression, 'We tiptoed around the issue'. Others expressed the decision to talk or not in terms of creating distance with the subject ('We stay away from talking about her') and avoiding the topic ('My husband and I try to avoid talking about it'). Other participants talked about the process of communicating about the death in terms of obstacles, impediments or blockages: 'Communication about the situation is difficult at times' and 'We were not able to talk'.

For the most part, effective communication between couples was metaphorically described as being 'open'. Participant statements that reflect this include: 'We communicate more openly', 'We openly share thoughts, feelings and ideas', 'Sometimes we have a heart-to-heart', 'We try to keep an open channel of dialogue', and (at the opposite end) 'We are still unable to talk openly with each other about [deceased child's] death'.

Discussion

This study examined participants' use of metaphorical language to describe the couple relationships following parental bereavement. The death of a child is an unusually traumatic life challenge. Often this type of stressor can aggrandise and exacerbate pre-existing relational issues, and the individual duress on each partner may result in a re-evaluation of the relationship itself. The death itself can function as a catalyst that may push the couple further down the path of relational decline, or can bring a couple closer.

The use of metaphor embodies the language used by bereaved parents to describe the impact the loss of a child has had on their dyadic relationships. Lakoff's (1993) theory of metaphor was the conceptual framework used to understand how metaphor is seamlessly and intricately woven into our language. The present study results are consistent with previous research, such that general metaphorical tendencies proposed by Lakoff and Johnson (2003), as well as relational metaphors proposed by Baxter (2003) and Owen (1985), were employed by bereaved parents. The goal of the present study was not to prove that metaphors are used in the language of the bereaved. Rather, the intent was to understand the perceptual experiences of the bereaved by examining the metaphorical thoughts revealed in their personal stories.

Relational trajectory

In the present study, the over-arching metaphors that were used by bereaved parents described (a) the 'event' in terms of the strain that it put on the relationship (*Causes*

as *Forces*), and (b) the change that resulted from the death (*Change as Motion*).

The 'Event'

The event, child death, was often described as the cause of the strain on the relationship (e.g., One participant stated: 'The death was the eventual catalyst for the demise of our relationship'). This was evident in language that is consistent with Lakoff's (1993) conception of an event structure metaphor, such that the event produces changes that are described in terms of movements (into or out of bounded regions) and causes as forces. Participants in the present study describe consequences of the event as 'an awful chapter in our lives', 'causing strain', 'being dealt a terrible loss', and 'The death had such an impact on us'. In each of these examples, the loss is described as consistent with Lakoff's (1993) 'difficulties are impediments to motion metaphor' (p. 220).

When describing their relationship with their partner, the most dominant metaphor presented was the idea of the *Relationship as Motion*. The relationship as motion metaphor describes the relationship as an entity that is moving and changing as a result of the child death. As such, the motion generally was described as either coming together or spreading apart. Both the direction (approach vs. avoid) and force (magnitude of strength) were used metaphorically. In addition to the general *Relationship as Motion* metaphor, the present study supports previous research conceptualising *Relationships as Living Organisms* (e.g., 'Our relationship grew stronger' and 'We have grown closer') and *Relationship as Journey* (e.g., 'We know our relationship can weather any storm' and 'We found our way back to each other'; Baxter, 2003; Owen 1985).

Negotiating grief as a couple

The study of grieving styles has been documented in the literature (Doughty, 2009). In one model of bereavement, adaptive grieving styles in the form of cognitive, behavioural, and affective outlets were considered a function of cultural and personality variables (Martin & Doka, 2000). Grieving styles vary in terms of emotional reporting and the expression of grief. Martin and Doka (2000) suggest that a bipolar continuum exists, with intuitive grieving at one end and an instrumental pattern of grieving at the other. Someone who enacts an intuitive pattern is a more affective griever: internally they feel extreme sadness and externally they convey their sadness through tears and emotional expression. In other words, they openly express their inner emotional state (Martin & Doka, 2000). On the other hand, instrumental grievers enact a more cognitive, behavioural, and problem-solving style. They may feel discomfort when experiencing and expressing emotions and prefer to be more task-oriented in their coping style. Martin and Doka (2000) suggest that people generally fall somewhere between these two

extreme styles of grieving ('blended style'), with one style more dominant than the other.

In the present study, grief was generally described metaphorically in terms of a difficult journey. This metaphorical conceptualisation is consistent with previous research on grief following bereavement (Graves, 2009). When two people simultaneously negotiate this journey, the perceptions and evaluation of a partner's grieving style can cause contention. In the present study, participants reported either being accepting of their partner's different grieving styles and acknowledged those differences (e.g., 'I accept the fact that we grieve differently') or they recognised the difference and it was a source of frustration for them (e.g., 'My husband and I grieve differently. There has been resentment, anger and sadness because of this.'). Intuitive grievers appeared to interpret their partner's instrumental grieving as insensitive or a form of non-grieving (e.g., 'He dealt with it by staying busy around the house'). On the other hand, instrumental grievers appeared to perceive their partner's intuitive grieving with frustration or sense of helplessness such that they didn't know how to help them (e.g., 'He could not take that I cried and he eventually left'). The data from this study suggest that while couples may grieve differently, the acknowledgement, acceptance and balancing of those differences can serve to strengthen the relationship, whereas the one-sided mindset of how grief should be experienced appeared to be a contributing factor in the dissolution of relationships.

Communication

In the present study, many couples talked about the quality of communication with their significant others and expressed the struggle that existed in deciding if and when to talk about the deceased child. This was expressed in terms of the metaphorical description as the 'elephant in the room'. This metaphor is an expression that describes an obvious truth or problem that is being avoided but needs to be addressed. Just as an elephant in a room would be impossible to miss, ignoring the elephant would be clearly evading an imminent problem. This metaphor most strongly reflects the dialectical struggle that parents have in talking about their deceased child.

Many participants struggled with the dialectical tension of 'openness–closedness' with their partner when they oscillated between the desire to discuss or avoid conversations surrounding the deceased child. The theoretical framework that can best explain this tension is relational dialectics theory (Baxter, 2004, 2006; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). A major tenet of the theory is that communication is a process of constructing and enacting negotiated opposing relational tendencies (Baxter, 2004; Baxter & Montgomery, 1996). Baxter and Montgomery (1996) propose three major internal dialectical tensions that are ongoing in personal

relationships: connectedness–separateness, certainty–uncertainty, and openness–closedness. ‘Connectedness–separateness’ refers to the contradiction between an individual’s need for autonomy and their need to be connected with others. ‘Certainty–uncertainty’ refers to the tension between the desire for novelty in the relationship versus predictability. ‘Openness–closedness’ refers to the amount and type of self-disclosure that is revealed.

The findings in the present study extend and support previous research on the particular dialectical tension of openness–closedness expressed by bereaved parents (Hooghe, Neimeyer, & Rober, 2012; Toller, 2005; Toller & Braithwaite, 2009). The present research suggests that this dialectical struggle is present when bereaved parents assess whether to communicate with each other regarding their deceased child (e.g., ‘We don’t talk about [deceased child] as much as I would like to’, and ‘We’ve struggled because he doesn’t like to talk about [deceased child]’). It appears that the management of this tension through conversational compromise may enhance relational quality whereas complete topic avoidance may promote relational disharmony.

Limitations

There are several limitations to this study worth noting. The first limitation is the composition of the sample itself. The majority of our respondents were Caucasian/White and well educated. In terms of gender bias, there were significantly more bereaved mothers ($n = 398$, 94.8%) in this study compared to fathers ($n = 20$, 4.8%). It would be valuable to learn more about grieving styles and how it impacts relationships from the male’s perspective. Also, these data are an interpretation of a couple’s functioning. It would be worthwhile to conduct interviews with bereaved couples in order to understand both perspectives on relational functioning. The third limitation worth mentioning is the data collection method. This study used an online survey methodology. Although the written information gathered was valuable, it would be worthwhile to conduct semi-structured interviews of couples to gather more in-depth, rich descriptions of metaphor and the relational dynamics that take place. Despite the limitations, this study provided insight into an area with very limited previous research, that is, the ways in which couples metaphorically experience and negotiate their relationship following the death of a child.

Future Research

Although this study, in part, examined metaphors used to explain couple adjustment, it would be valuable to further understand the relational metaphors utilised by bereaved parents regarding other familial relationships, including living siblings of the deceased. Metaphor research appears

to be an uncommon pathway to understanding this phenomenon, but this study supports the idea that it can shed light on parental bereavement.

Hooghe, Neimeyer, and Rober (2011) argue the need for a more complex understanding of couple communication during grief. Specifically, communication should be examined through the lens of a dialogic perspective (Hooghe, Neimeyer, & Rober, 2011). From a dialogical perspective, communication is conceptualised as the co-construction of meaning in a communication event. When ideal, the ‘listener’ refrains from telling the griever how to feel or cope and trusts that dialogue will facilitate meaning and deepen understanding (Umphrey & Cacciatore, 2011). It would be valuable to gain further insight in how bereaved couples co-construct meaning and how this meaning evolves over time.

Implications

These findings highlight the importance of understanding the complexity of parental bereavement on marital adjustment. Examining the metaphorical representations that bereaved parents use can help clinicians further understand how parents perceive and experience relational changes. Metaphor serves several functions (Spaull, Read, & Chantry, 2001). Metaphors can serve to help the bereaved talk about their experience without having to directly use language or actual stories of death and grief. Metaphors can help the bereaved to tap directly into their experiences and use language that closely captures their sentiments. Metaphors serve as a way for bereaved to facilitate and share meaning with others. Metaphors can serve to underscore a prominent characteristic of a situation and help others recognise, understand, or relate to a situation better (Rosenblatt, 2008). In the context of the therapist-client relationship, metaphor can enhance that connection or relationship through shared, mutual understanding. Metaphor may serve to facilitate the process of grief work. When grief is conceptualised as navigating awkward or unfamiliar terrain, the bereaved may better understand why grief can seem difficult at times and bearable other times (Spaull, Read, & Chantry, 2001). Although further research is needed in this area, this study adds to the body of knowledge regarding conjugal relationship adjustment following the death of a child.

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